

## Lesson 5

# How to Create a Family History

### Introduction

This lesson will help you explore some of the ways to preserve your unique family heritage. Resources and information in this lesson include:

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### What Is a Family History?

A family history is a record of a family and of the lives of family members. It is usually written as a book, and this lesson will give ideas and instructions on writing a family history book. But a family history can take many forms, including the following:

- A record of your family with you as a child, containing recollections of your parents and other living ancestors.
- A record of your family with you as a parent, containing recollections of your children and your other descendants.
- A written history of an ancestor containing several generations of family information going back in time.
- An ancestral family history with a chapter for the couple you start with and additional chapters for each descendant family.
- A collection of family traditions and their origins.
- Newsletters.
- Time capsules.

- Family organization books.
- Posters.
- A genetic family history, which identifies specific physical traits (eye color, height, weight, complexion, and so on), causes of death, family illnesses.
- Family recipe collections.
- Heritage albums. More than a scrapbook; a heritage album is a record of the life of a family and includes photographs, documents, and so on.
- A record of your findings and experiences as you begin with one ancestor and work backwards, a story of research and discoveries.

### **Why Create a Family History?**

A family history can be a great blessing to you and to your posterity and those who come after you. You and they can learn from the events, thoughts, and growth in your life and in the lives of your ancestors, even from those things that may otherwise seem mundane. Among the reasons to create a family history are the following:

- People want to know who they are and where they come from.
- A family history can help you gain knowledge and appreciation for those who have gone before you, where and how they lived, why they made the choices they made, and how they shaped the family's future.
- It will help you gain greater understanding of yourself and how you fit in the overall picture of your family.
- It will help preserve family stories for future generations.

### **When Should You Begin Creating Your Family History?**

Start now to write a family history, even if you only work on it a few minutes a day. Those minutes—and the work you do—will add up over time, and you will accomplish much as you work regularly and consistently.

Do not procrastinate working on your family history. The longer you wait, the more likely it will be that older family members may die or become invalid without passing along the memories that could be so valuable for you. You will never finish gathering family information or researching your ancestors, so don't put off writing; you can always do a second volume to include new information you discover. Or you can do a binder of stories, which is easy to update.

Set a realistic time schedule. This will be a big project. Schedule enough time to gather information, organize it, and compile it into a finished format.

### **Before You Begin**

The first step is to choose which type of family history you would like to do. Consider the resources available to you, the materials you have, and your skills and interests. Determine what kind of family history would be most beneficial to you and others. Consider also how you will focus your family history. Consider the following possibilities if you are doing a historic work:

- Do you want to document all the ancestors of a family member?

- Do you want to identify an ancestral couple and document all their descendants?
- Do you want to focus on one family in a geographic location?

**Expert Tip:** *If you plan to make your family history available to other family members, begin now to compile a mailing list of relatives and friends who may be interested in owning a copy.*

## **Beginning Your Work**

Before you spend a lot of time in research and writing, you should determine what you already know and where there are gaps in your knowledge. Start by writing down what you know about your subject—this writing might be an outline, it might be a paragraph or a few pages of free writing (without regard to grammar or to connecting the sentences in a logical way), or it might take another form.

Once you have determined what you know, you can begin to organize it according to the form of history you have decided to create. If you are writing a book, you can determine what chapters will appear in the book. Will you organize the book chronologically? Will you divide it into chapters that deal with each branch of a family? If you have enough information, you might also determine how you will organize each individual chapter. To help you organize your information, you could consider creating a timeline for those people who are the focus of your work.

Look over what you have organized, and determine what gaps there are in your knowledge. What don't you know that you need to know to carry out your plan?

The next step is to fill in the gaps in your knowledge. Gather items and information related to the people you plan to write about in your history. Store everything you find in a safe and secure place. Keep in mind that you can continue writing your history as you gather information. If you wait to begin writing until you have finished gathering information, you may never get around to writing your history. Also it is often best to write when the gathered information is fresh on your mind.

The following ideas might help you as you gather information:

- Interview all living relatives who may remember events in the lives of your subjects. Or perhaps they never met the subjects but they remember stories of them as told by older family members. Another possibility is that they may remember community and world events that affected your ancestor, even if they do not know how your ancestor experienced the event personally.
- Interview friends, neighbors, work associates, or others who might have known something about those people your history will focus on.
- Gather photographs and illustrations that will add to the story—family portraits, photographs of family events, announcements of weddings or other events, pictures of churches and schools attended, the old family home, and so on. If a relative is reluctant to give you original documents, artifacts or photographs, ask if you can make copies or if you can photograph the items.
- Learn more about the geographic area where the individuals lived.

- Weather, geography, and politics will have had a direct effect on your family. Learn more about the time period and the world and community events.
- Consider studying old medical terms. Obituaries, death certificates, and doctor and hospital records generally give details of illnesses and cause of death. It is usually helpful to know what today's illnesses were called in earlier time periods.
- Be honest in your writing. When you write fiction, you can be as creative with the facts as you want. When you write history, however, you must be careful how you interpret facts. History allows for some interpretation to a degree. But if you are unsure of facts and you have to make judgments, let readers know that you offer your own interpretation not what actually happened.

### **Layout Decisions**

As you are gathering and organizing information, decide how you plan to lay out your family history. The following list is helpful if you plan on writing a book. Some of the listed items are necessary, and you can exclude others if you choose. You may add or delete some of these as the work progresses, but it is good to have a format in mind as you begin.

- Cover
- Title page
- Frontispiece
- Foreword
- Preface
- Table of contents
- List of photographs and illustrations
- Chronology
- Narrative (the actual story)
- Appendices
- Maps
- Index

### **Things to Consider as You Write**

You will make good progress if you follow a consistent schedule in creating your family history. The following ideas may help you as you write your family history.

- Do not try to include all the information you have about every family member. Doing so will overwhelm or bore the reader. Be thorough, but be selective.
- Be honest. If you are going to include sensitive information, don't try to minimize the real impact. Nor should you exaggerate the negative for the sake of interest or sensationalism.
- Be sensitive. Some events are fascinating and true but because of the delicate nature of those events, you may not want to include the information in your history. Time is

usually the best deciding factor. If people are still living who were affected by the sensitive event, you may not want to include it in your history. You may consider writing what your research has uncovered, however, and putting it away to use later when it can be revealed without hurting others.

- Fictional histories (histories based on factual names and places but woven around events and experiences that may not have actually happened to your ancestors) are very popular. They can be fun to read. Family histories, however, are not the place for fictional accounts.

**Expert Tip:** *If you are a genealogist, you will know the importance of documentation. When you create a family history, documentation is also important. You can use footnotes or endnotes to document the sources of your information. Some people find notes located at the end of the chapter less distracting than notes located at the bottom of a page. These chapter end notes are also easier for you since you can add extra end notes without disrupting page layout and format. An easy alternative is to include short parenthetical notes in the text, with a “Works Cited” section at the end of the book for more extensive information.*

## Start Writing

As you begin writing, do not get bogged down with anxieties you might have about writing. Get the information, stories, feelings, and outcomes recorded. Don’t get hung up on style, grammar, and punctuation at this point; you can polish your writing later. The following suggestions may help you if you are writing a book for your family history:

- As you include stories and statements from family members, don’t overly edit their words. Sometimes it is very effective to include unique speech patterns, grammatical errors, and the style of the speaker. You should be careful, however, to avoid making someone look illiterate or stupid.
- Consider a possible three-part format for each chapter:
  1. Stories and accounts about the family or individuals.
  2. Photographs and illustrations that document events.
  3. Additional documents that supplement your stories.
- Discuss sensitive material with anyone you think may be concerned or affected by the material before you include it in your writing.
- Tell the truth, but don’t be offensive.
- Try to understand the choices and challenges your ancestors faced. Try to get your readers to empathize with each character.
- Ask questions and get answers as you write. For example:
  - How did your ancestor get his property? Did he homestead? Did he inherit it? If he bought it, how did he get the money to purchase the land? How did he finance it?
  - Did he have to clear trees, dig irrigation ditches, or build a road to his property?
  - What was your ancestor’s profession? What was it like to have the job he had?

- What was an average day like in his profession or trade at that same time?
- Did your ancestor have to contend with hostile neighbors?
- How did your ancestor celebrate holidays and special events?
- Would your ancestors have used a particular dialect? If they emigrated to a new location in their lifetime, how did they adjust to their new culture?
- How did your ancestors deal with disasters that happened during their lifetimes (economic difficulties, epidemics, Indian attacks, floods, droughts, and so on).
- The less you know about your ancestors, the more you will have to use general historical information about their place and time to put them into historical perspective.
- Don't let your writing become a list of dates and places. Include stories and background information to bring dates and places to life.
- Get permission from living persons before you write anything about them.
- Talk about the joys and mistakes of the people you write about, their triumphs, tragedies, and hardships.
- Write a chapter; leave it for a few days, and then go back to it. Does it make sense? Is it interesting as you review it?

**Expert Tip:** *If you use a computer to write your history, remember to back up your work often. After all your hard work and effort, it would be a tragedy to lose the information because of a computer failure.*

### **Other Things to Include**

Images and visual aids help readers visualize places and events and can portray what words cannot. It is often difficult to give an accurate description of a person. One photograph will do what a page of written text cannot do. Visuals that will help readers include the following:

- Photographs
- Maps showing the area your people lived or where they immigrated from
- Charts
- Certificates
- Awards
- Journal entries
- Copies of newspaper articles
- Copies of letters
- Official documents (wills, deeds, vital records, and so on)
- Personal writing, such as poems, stories, recollections, and so on
- Recipes
- Art work by a family member

### **Time to Review and Evaluate**

After you finish your writing, find a relative or friend who can review your work. Ask yourself and other reviewers the following questions:

- Do you feel involved as you read? Do you care about the outcome of the history?
- Do the stories flow well? Does one story, idea, sentence, or event transition well into the next one? If not, how can the connection between them be strengthened?
- Have you made the identity of the people in the stories clear? For example, if you speak about Grandma, have you explained which grandma, or do you explain which aunt you refer to when you say “My aunt gave me my favorite Christmas gift that year”?
- Does anything need clarification?
- Is the writing too technical or too hard to read?
- Are the sentences too long or complicated?
- Is there too much detail?
- Are there any spelling errors?
- How is the grammar? (Often grammar mistakes are obvious if the material is read aloud.)
- Are the same words or expressions used too often? For example, is the phrase *I remember* used too much?
- Is the history clear and well organized?
- Do the stories need to be reduced, or do details need to be added to make them more enjoyable?
- Are people described well enough?
- Are names, dates, and places accurate?
- Is the proper tense used throughout the history?

Now is the time to review and correct the appearance of your work. Consider line spacing, headings of chapters, and sections of work. Now is also the time to decide where to insert photographs, letters, copies of letters, and so on.

### **After the Review**

After the review, express gratitude for the efforts of those who helped you, and then use what you feel is valuable. Continue polishing your work.

## Resources

### Web sites

[http://www.genealogy.com/sharing\\_research.html](http://www.genealogy.com/sharing_research.html) (A selection of resources for writing family histories.)

<http://www.ancestry.com/library/view/columns/compass/7004.asp> (A guide for writing family histories.)

<http://www.hhs.gov/familyhistory/> (This surgeon general's Web site helps build the health histories of family members and ancestors.)

### Books

- *How to Write Your Personal and Family History—a resource manual* by Keith E. Banks. General resource for personal and family history writing.
- *Writing Family Histories and Memoirs* by Kirk Polking. An outline of why and how to write different types of family histories, with brief information on basic research.
- *Scrapbooking Your Family History* by Maureen A Taylor. Organizing and preserving materials for family history based on memory books.
- *Writing Up Your Family History* by John Titford. Information on preparing, writing, and publishing your family history.
- *You Can Write Your Family History* by Sharon DeBartolo Carmack. Guide to writing your family history.



## **Ideas for Teachers**

This class can be taught in two or more weeks if you need extra time for class members to work on activities outside of class. The extra time will give class members the opportunity to discuss issues involved in creating a family history, followed by a week to start their work and bring it into class for review.

The following suggestions will help you present the information in this lesson. Choose information from the lesson that will be most helpful to your class members, and consider the best way to present that information. Consider the needs of your class members, and plan and adapt the materials to suit their needs.

### **Teaching Goals**

- After reviewing the students' progress in their family history research, help them know if they are ready to begin writing a family history.
- Help students understand that there are a variety of ways that a family history can be created and preserved.
- Help students understand issues to consider when beginning a family history.
- Help students understand what should be included within a family history.

### **Preparing to Teach**

The following suggestions are important if you are working with your class members for the first time.

- Contact your class members before the first class period and get to know a little about each student.
- Ask about their expectations for the class.
- Assess their experience with writing and with family history. Determine if they have read other family histories.
- Ask how much they know about their family.
- If you can find them, bring several examples of family histories other people have created.

### **Teaching Ideas**

#### ***During the first class***

- Bring several examples of family histories you have found. Share how you feel about these histories. Ask if any of the class members have a history of an ancestor that is significant to them. Discuss how the relations and descendants of your class members might feel about the family history they are planning to write.
- Ask class members why they want to create a family history. Remember that there are no wrong answers.
- Discuss with class members who will benefit from the family history.

- Discuss different types of family histories. What interests do the class members have?
- Have students consider which family or line they want to pursue.
- Have students write a paragraph about why they are writing the history. This paragraph may become part of their introduction.
- Ask class members to come next week with a brief family story and an artifact that relates to the story.
- Encourage the class members to begin gathering information and objects they will use as they begin to create their family history.

***During the second class***

- Ask class members what information and or objects they found that might prove helpful in creating a family history.
- If class members have begun writing a family history, ask them if they would be willing to share what they have created.
- Have the students exchange stories. Give them time to read the stories and then have the class members discuss the stories and ask questions about them for enrichment and clarification.
- Have students discuss whether they want to change the focus of their family history project after their work so far.
- Review the list of Web sites and books.